

**May I speak in the name of the Living God,
Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.**

A celebration in the Church's calendar which often slips by almost unnoticed is the Feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, otherwise known as Candlemas.

Although it is Important in its own right, it also marks the end of the 40 days of Christmas and Epiphany.

In medieval times, Candlemas was celebrated with great pomp and ceremony, when people would process into church carrying candles to symbolise Jesus' presentation in the Temple, and old Simeon's recognition of him as 'a light to lighten the Gentiles'

As we heard in Our Gospel Reading this morning, it is Luke who records the occasion when Mary and Joseph brought their new first born baby to the temple in thanksgiving for a safe delivery and to present him to God.

Each of those we hear about in Luke's account of the meeting in the Temple, were there for special and particular reasons.

Mary and Joseph were there to fulfil rituals, set out in the Old Testament, which Luke brings together in his account of what happened. One involved the redemption of the firstborn, another the purification of the mother following the rigours of childbirth, marking her re-entry into society and its religious observances from which she had been exempt whilst she recovered.

Also in the Temple that day was, Simeon, a devout man who was particularly sensitive to the Holy Spirit's leading and who, on this day, aware of the Spirit's nudging to go specially to the temple, had come not knowing what he would find.

When he saw the small baby Jesus, Simeon knew in his heart that he had seen the coming of God's salvation and, therefore, his own time on earth was drawing to a close. And so he placed himself in God's hands, just as Mary and Joseph were doing in presenting Jesus at the temple.

Then Simeon blessed the parents and spoke hard words to Mary about her son and her own suffering "as a sword would pierce her soul."

Today, as we are surrounded by light and peace in this beautiful building, we are reminded that the gospel makes demands upon us. Following in the way of Christ will not always be easy or straightforward, and may involve real suffering.

Then there is another person, with yet another reason for being there. Anna is one of those people who seek and find a special home in holy places. The Temple was somehow the place she belonged.

Anna represents all those people who find a special kind of shelter in holy places, as many people do in the cathedrals and churches up and down our country.

Anna is simply there at the right time, and in hearing Simeon's words about Jesus, she is drawn into the encounter and, she too praises God and also speaks about it to the people around.

So we have five people, all of whose lives were touched in some way by this unplanned encounter in the temple.

Out of it came this festival we know as Candlemas, or the Presentation of Christ in the temple and a song that has been sung through the centuries, and is still use in the traditional service of Evensong today:

***Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in
peace,
According to thy word,
For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,
which thou hast prepared before the face of all
people,
To be light to lighten the Gentiles and to be the
glory of thy people Israel.***

For us today's festival marks the end of the Christmas season, and it focuses us on the themes of presentation, purification, meeting, and light for the world.

These are joyful and hopeful themes.

But the Feast of the Presentation is also the hinge when we turn from Christmas to look towards Lent, Holy Week and the passion of Christ, the light of the world. - And so there is a bitter-sweetness about today, a poignancy as, like Mary, we take in the fact that the joy at this child's birth will soon have to embrace, the pain of the Cross.

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Simeon and Anna had very different reasons for being in the temple that day.

Everyone who comes into our church during the course of the year – whether for Christmas and Easter services, for baptisms, funerals, or weddings – will have a variety of reasons for being here .

The interaction of the stories of those in that one brief encounter in the temple in Jerusalem, assures us that no gathering in God's presence is random or without meaning and purpose.

Let us pray that all all our encounters during the course of this year, whether here in church, or in our day to day activities in the wider community, may present opportunities for us to witness to the light and love of Christ in our lives –so that the lives of all those we meet, may also be touched by his grace.

In the same way that Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to God, we pray today that we may be presented to God with pure and clean hearts by that same Jesus Christ, God's son who is our Messiah.

And our response is like that of Simeon, to be willing to be presented, to be still before God in this holy place and open to the prompting of God's Spirit.

I would like to end by giving us each an opportunity to be still in the presence of God, as we reflect on the words of a hymn by Graham Kendrick, which for me sum up what this feast of Candlemas is about.

Jesus, stand among us
at the meeting of our lives,
be our sweet agreement
at the meeting of our eyes;

So to You we're gathering
out of each and every land,
Christ the love between us
at the joining of our hands;

Jesus stand among us
at the breaking of the bread;
join us as one body
as we worship You, our Head.

*O Jesus, we love You,
so we gather here;
join our hearts in unity
and take away our fear.*